

*FWP Region 7**P.O. Box 1630 / 352 I-94 Business Loop**Miles City, MT 59301*

April 12, 2019

PUBLIC SCOPING NOTICE**RE: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks land proposal**

Dear Interested Party:

Proposed Project Description

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) will be preparing an Environmental Analysis on a proposal to purchase two separate and distinct but overlapping perpetual Conservation Easements (CEs) totaling 10,072.22 deeded acres in Custer and Prairie Counties, Montana. The reason for two separate CEs, rather than one single CE, is to take advantage of available funding sources, which have somewhat unique requirements. The first CE would utilize primarily NRCS Agricultural Lands Easements (ALE) funding. The ALE program does not fit well for areas under tillage agriculture. Therefore, the ALE CE would not include land with a tillage history. The second CE would utilize Habitat Montana dollars (derived from the sale of hunting licenses) to fund the remaining acres but would encumber the entire property to ensure that the land remains in a single unit in the future. Both CE's would be administered by FWP.

Conservation easements are partnerships between FWP and willing private landowners to conserve important native wildlife habitats and provide public recreational access. The landowners receive financial compensation in exchange for adopting the conservation and public access covenants of the easement while continuing to operate a viable, productive ranching operations. The proposed easement, called the "Coal Creek Conservation Easement," would provide protection, enhancement, and public access to a unique combination of eastern Montana habitats. One of the primary habitat features is the Coal Creek riparian zone, which consists of a large, uninterrupted silver sagebrush bottom that traverses the property for roughly 5.5 linear miles. Once prevalent throughout southeastern Montana, many silver sage bottoms have been converted to hay or cropland. An additional unique habitat feature along Coal Creek is the presence of several seeps and springs that dot the landscape in the hills and draws leading into Coal Creek. These natural water features create numerous permanent wetlands, large mesic drainages, and hardwood draws, providing an exceptional level of habitat and biological diversity. The southern portion of the property contains large tracts of Wyoming big sagebrush grasslands and scenic badlands. The northern portion of the property contains large tracts of ponderosa pine and juniper.

The proposed CE would conserve and maintain large healthy blocks of native riparian and sagebrush habitats from conversion to other cover types, benefitting wildlife and agriculture, while also providing for managed public hunting. Placing a CE on the property would have no effect on the taxable base of the property. Please see the attached map for additional information.

Project Objectives

The primary objectives of this land project include:

- Provide conservation and enhancement for high-quality eastern Montana native habitats while maintaining traditional land uses.
- Provide public hunting and recreational opportunity in a landscape dominated by private lands.

Public Involvement and Process

The 30-day scoping period will begin on April 12, 2019. Please submit either written or e-mailed comments by May 12, 2019 to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Melissa Foster, Wildlife Biologist
PO Box 1630, Miles City, MT 59301
mfoster@mt.gov

Comments received during this scoping period will help FWP determine public interest, identify potential issues that would require further analysis, and may provide insight for refining the proposal or for developing and analyzing additional alternatives. Upon completion of the scoping phase, FWP will determine next steps, which may include conducting an environmental analysis with additional opportunity for public input or taking no further action on the proposed project.

If you have any questions regarding this project or scoping process, please contact Melissa Foster, FWP Wildlife Biologist, at 406-852-2032.

Sincerely,



Brad Schmitz
Region 7 Regional Supervisor

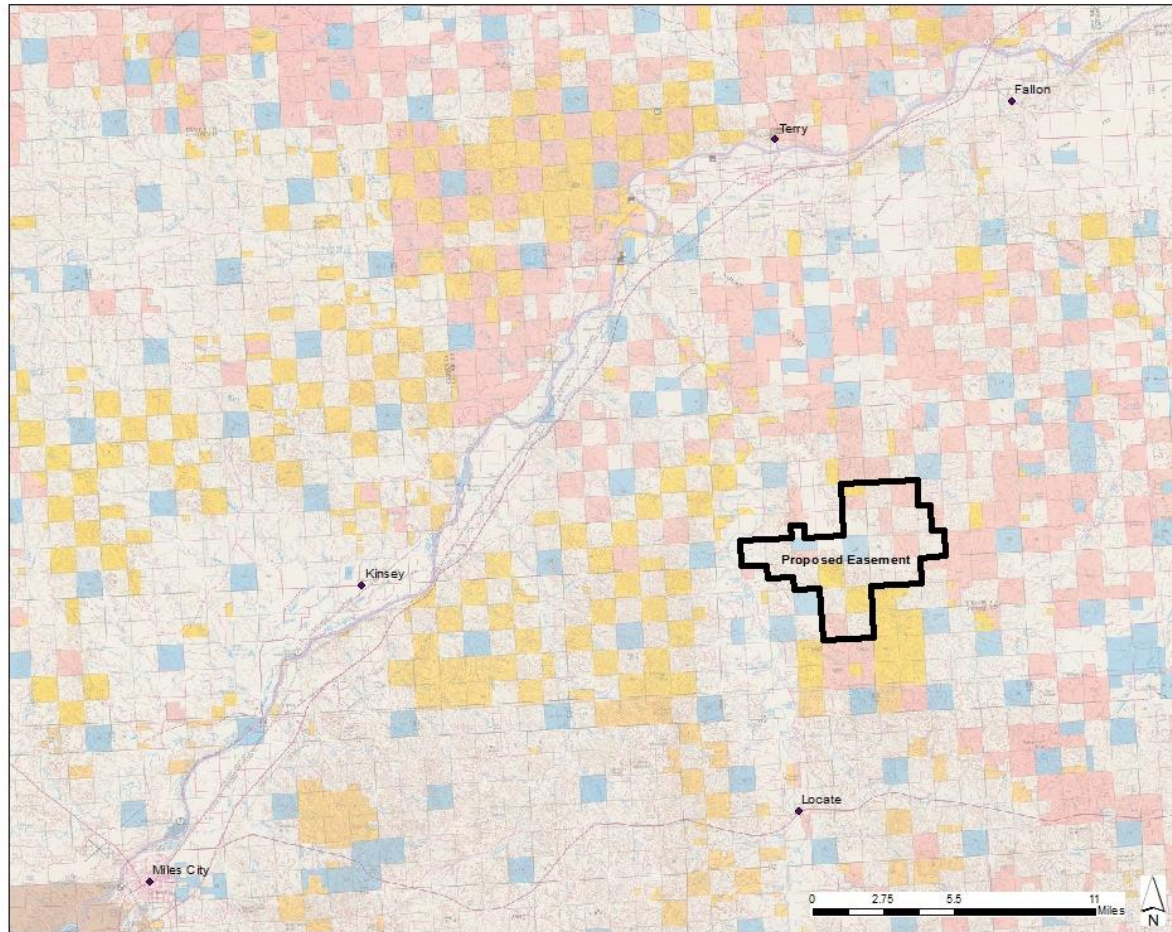


Figure 1. Boundary of the proposed conservation easement and associated public land leases. The easements would encumber only deeded land (shown in white).